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THE FUNCTION OF A SUNDAY-SCHOOL RITUAL

It would be difficult to find a Sunday school that has not some kind of a ritual ; that is, some kind of a service made up of prayer, music, Scripture reading, etc., preceding or following the study of the Bible lesson. But what proper place is there for such exercises in the Sunday school ? The Sunday school is an educational institution in which the study and teaching of the Bible occupy the central place. Why should it have a ritual ? The answer is, we believe, clear and important in its bearing on the other question, what kind of a ritual the Sunday school ought to have. The Sunday school is an educational institution, but the definition must not be taken too narrowly ; it is not merely a Bible school. Its ultimate and comprehensive aim is the moral and religious education of the members of the school. To this end the teaching of the Bible is one means—the chief one, indeed, but not necessarily the only one. In such teaching religious education is sought chiefly through instruction of the mind, through the presentation of the great facts of biblical history and the great truths of biblical revelation. But education—it is preëminently true of the religious side of education—can never be purely intellectual. The religious feelings need cultivation and education as truly as the mind requires religious instruction.

In this fact, and in the comprehensive definition of the function of the Sunday school as the religious education of the pupils, are found at once the justification of the ritual and the guiding principle for determining its character. While the teaching hour makes its chief appeal to the mind, the ritual service has relation chiefly to the cultivation of the emotions.

Let it not be supposed that the two elements, the intellectual and the emotional, can be wholly divorced from each other. There must be feeling, reverence, and love of truth, admiration for noble character, detestation of wickedness, in connection

with the study of the Bible, if this is to be most effective. There must be thought and even instruction in the ritual, or it will fail to make its due appeal to the emotions. But the distinction of emphasis remains. Broadly speaking, the teaching hour appeals to the intellect, the ritual service to the feelings.

What, then, are the feelings which the Sunday-school ritual should seek to cultivate? We answer: reverence, adoration, love, penitence, aspiration, hope. Central in the whole service must be the aim to bring before the mind the thought—a true thought—of God in the perfection of his character, in the majesty of his holiness, in the infinitude of his love and mercy. This is to be accomplished, not by formal instruction concerning the divine nature, or chiefly by the recitation of a creed. It is rather to be attained by the reading or recitation of such sentences of Scripture as express in exalted and poetic language the adoration of those clear-sighted and reverent souls who have gained a vision of God; by the singing of hymns in which godly men and women have sought to express the emotions of their souls; and by prayer in which, whether one speak while the others follow only with the mind and heart, or all join in unison, the hearts of all shall be lifted to God together. Such reverent and, in the proper sense of the word, solemn bringing before the mind of the thought of God is calculated as is no other means to call forth and develop our religious emotions.

When in an atmosphere, not of cold definition, of heated controversy, or of didactic exactness, but of elevated and sincere praise, we gain a vision of God, as the almighty, the ever-living, perfect in holiness and boundless in mercy, then our hearts learn to revere, to adore, to love. Then, too, touched as we never could be by mere instruction, we are moved to penitent grief over our own sins; then we long to rise to higher planes of life ourselves, to enter into fellowship with God himself, and, gaining confidence from the contemplation of God's goodness, begin to hope that what we long for may still be attained. In this atmosphere animosities cease, petty ambitions die away, and the love

to our fellow-men that before perhaps seemed impossible begins to take possession of the heart.

What kind of a ritual will accomplish these ends? In the first place, the service must be dignified. By this is not meant that it must be cold and dead, but that it must be *THE CHARACTER-ISTICS OF A PROPER RITUAL* serious and calculated to cultivate seriousness. The precise degree and type of dignity that are expedient in any given school must be determined with great wisdom in view of the class of pupils of which the school is made up. A service that would be wholly suitable, impressive, and elevating, in a school made up of pupils drawn from cultivated Christian families, might be absurd and impossible in a mission school in the city, or on the frontier. Regard must be had to the age of the pupils also. Wherever the size of the school and the structure of the building permit it, it is desirable that there should be separate exercises for different divisions of the school. A service adapted to the youngest pupils cannot be constantly helpful to adults; the converse is even more emphatically true. But whatever the age or the intelligence of the pupils, the elements which compose the service and the manner of those who conduct it should both be such as to cultivate reverence. Songs that belittle and cheapen religion, leaders who turn the service into a drill in singing, librarians who distribute books while the service is in progress, superintendents who are unable to maintain control and secure quiet—all these tend to defeat the true ends of the Sunday school service.

But while it is dignified, the service ought also to be cheerful. Nowhere is a sad and saddening service more out of place than in the Sunday school. Young people are prone enough to regard religion as sad and gloomy. The Sunday school ought to do nothing which will foster this idea. There may be times when it is desirable in some part of the Sunday-school service so to emphasize the fact of sin and the need of repentance as to give a note of sadness to that part. But this should not be the prevailing note. The gospel is good news; good news even for

sinner, since there is forgiveness for those who repent. The keynote of the Sunday school should be a joyous one.

The service ought to be one in which all can take some part. This is less important in the case of the adult division of the school, if its services are held apart from those of the rest of the school, than in the other divisions; but it holds in general for every part of the school. A service which makes its appeal to the feelings from without may awaken emotion, but to cultivate the religious feelings, to educate them, they must be given opportunity for expression. Such opportunity may be afforded by responsive reading, by prayer in unison, by singing. Incidentally, this will help in maintaining order and dignity by holding the attention and maintaining the interest of the pupils. But it has its deeper reason in the fact that it is necessary to the attainment of the proper educational purpose of the service.

The ritual of the Sunday school is deserving of the most careful study on the part of all who are interested in promoting the efficiency of the Sunday school. Important and central as is the study of the Bible, the ritual has yet its own distinct educational value, and should never be crowded into the position of a mere appendage to the teaching hour. The experiment referred to in the October number of the *BIBLICAL WORLD*, of dividing the Sunday-school hour into two quite distinct portions, the first given to the teaching of the lesson, preceded perhaps by a single hymn or a brief prayer; the second to the ritual service, thus securing greater continuity and impressiveness, and avoiding the conversion of the opening exercises into a mere leeway for the arrival of tardy teachers and pupils—has been eminently successful in some cases, and is worthy of serious consideration by other schools. The employment of a printed order of service, varied from time to time, has likewise been found to be helpful in many schools. But whatever the methods employed—and no one method will be adapted to all schools—the improvement of the ritual is one of the pressing needs in Sunday-school work.

*THE SUBJECT
DEMANDS STUDY*